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THE POETRY OF RUPERT BROOKE

BY ST. JOHN G. ERVINE

WHEN I remember Rupert Brooke as I first saw him, and as I last saw him, and look at his portrait, I cannot believe that he is dead. It seems to me to be incredible that so much beauty, his physical appearance and his power to create spiritual loveliness, should have been destroyed in the very hour of blooming, at the moment when he was passing swiftly from youthful wit and cleverness to a man's maturity of feeling. "The heart of another is a dark forest," says Anton Tchekhov in one of his stories of Russian life; so perhaps there is completion where men with small or broken vision see only a beginning or an attempt, and it may be that Rupert Brooke had made a full circle when he died of sunstroke in the Dardanelles; but no one can read the five sonnets which he wrote just before his death and not feel that had he lived he would have made wider circles still.

Some of the poems which are printed in Brooke's last volume, notably that one which is called "Heaven," are the expression of a fine, but not completely formed mind; they are witty and very clever, and are clearly the outcome of considerable culture, but they do not convince the reader that their author had felt very deeply, or endured more than the small irritations that afflict the life of a comfortable and imaginative youth. There is a note of petulant bravado in the love poems which shows that, although there were wounds, there was also quick healing,—that the hurt to his vanity was greater than the hurt to his heart; and the reader feels that instead of exhibiting his wound, he is showing how little he cares:

Your hands, my dear, adorable,
Your lips of tenderness—
Oh, I've loved you faithfully and well,
Three years, or a bit less.
It wasn't a success.

Thank God, that's done! and I'll take the road,
 Quit of my youth and you,
 The Roman road to Wendover
 By Tring and Lilley Hoo,
 As a free man may do.

* * * * *

I shall desire and I shall find
 The best of my desires;
 The Autumn road, the mellow wind
 That soothes the darkening shires,
 And laughter, and inn-fires.

White mist about the black hedgerows,
 The slumbering Midland plain,
 The silence where the clover grows,
 And the dead leaves in the lane,
 Certainly, these remain.

And I shall find some girl, perhaps,
 And a better one than you,
 With eyes as wise, but kindlier,
 And lips as soft, but true.
 And I daresay she will do.

There is beauty in those verses, and extraordinary deftness, but there is also a calculated harshness and a deliberately wrought roughness which make the reader doubt the poet's claim to be "quit of my youth," even if he were quit of "you." Some contemporary poets, influenced by Masfield, have intentionally interpolated uncouth lines into their verses, hoping that by the sudden jolt of a jarring rhythm they may create, not merely a contrast, but a renewal of a mood. The smooth flow of melodious verse that came from Tennyson, that comes to-day from Mr. Alfred Noyes, makes the mind sleepy after a while. The reader tires, too, of the seemliness of these placid poets whose doubts, when they have any, are the doubts of dons and nicely-mannered men. Tennyson's peasants are always ready to touch their caps or pull their forelocks, and Mr. Noyes's roystering adventurers are not nearly so raw as they say they are—one feels that they have never steered a ship through a storm, that they have never had to tighten their belts to lessen their hunger, and that their oaths were learned from books. There was design in Rupert Brooke's uncouth verses. He wrote:

Oh, I've loved you faithfully and well,
 Three years, or a bit less.
 It wasn't a success —

with the strict intention of scarifying and irritating the professors and the academicians. One almost imagines him, as he writes these lines, forgetting that his love was unkind to him, and chuckling as he thinks of the shock that Professor Saintsbury will have when he reads:

. . . or a bit less.
 It wasn't a success.

or:

Certainly, these remain.

or:

And I daresay she will do.

These verses are clever, but they are only clever. They contain some of the bright boy's disregard of tradition. They are in harmony with the general discontent with established forms and institutions which became so perceptible in all artistic endeavor during the five years immediately preceding the European Disaster. Youth, restive under the clumsy compulsion of Age, suddenly refused to yield any further obedience to its elders. Youth had learned that the old man's advice, "Wait until you are old enough to know better," invariably resulted in a race of grey-beards who were too cowardly to know better; and so, in those five years, troops of young painters, poets, sculptors, novelists, and composers tramped through Europe, cursing conventions and belittling the accumulated beauty of centuries. Signor Marinetti blew squeaky trumpets in the Catacombs and incited his followers to explode Chinese crackers in the Colosseum. The older artists, disconcerted by this sudden irruption of violent youths, fell to mockery and then to alarmed rage. In all the domains of Art, there were continual processions of strange artists, all violent, all incoherent, all ruthless, and all angry, so that the spectators became dizzy with amazement and dubious of the world's sanity.

How far Rupert Brooke's deliberately wrought harshness was part of that world-movement toward brutality and primitive impressions, and how far it was part of a peculiar personal feeling, it is difficult to say. He was influenced to some extent by Strindberg, and I once heard him speak of women in the Strindbergian manner; but it never occurred to me that that was any more than a passing mood. He had,

I think, a great regard for Masfield's poetry, and the only play he ever wrote, a prose piece in one act, was moulded in the Masfield shape. But neither of these writers had any permanent control over him. The bulk of his verse, odd as it may seem in view of his reaction from the Tennysonian melody, resembles Tennyson's poetry. It has the same shapeliness, the same flow of musical words, and I do not doubt that, had he lived, Brooke would have abandoned the revolutionaries and made his peace with the ages.

He was a man of exceptional appearance. The word "beautiful" has, through the efforts of romantic writers, become almost exclusively a word that is reserved for the description of women, and it gives a disagreeable impression of effeminacy when it is applied to men. There was nothing of an effeminate character about Rupert Brooke, but he was undoubtedly beautiful. I remember one night, when I was returning to my home in a London suburb, Brooke came into the carriage of the "Underground" in which I was sitting. It was full of tired, pale men and women, lying in the loose attitudes that are adopted by people who are too fatigued to be particular of their appearance in public. The unshaded electric lamps made a harsh glare on every face and gave it a drawn, grey look. . . . Rupert Brooke suddenly came into that carriage like a wind from heaven.

Those who did not know him might have imagined, after reading the poems in which he mocked the body and jeered at physical beauty, that he was a hideous dwarf, profaning fine things out of envy and bitter spite. In one of his earlier poems he describes Helen of Troy in a possible old age, a toothless, nagging, bleary hag, and in the same book there is a poem on seasickness that might turn a queasy stomach. Brooke seemed to hate his fine looks, not because he was indifferent to beauty, but because it might so easily become a snare for his soul. And so, in his poetry, he denounced the flesh with greater violence than John the Baptist, and, in his life, he took care not to stay too long in places where flatterers are. Once he told me with what pleasure he quitted London and went to Grantchester, the little village outside Cambridge where he spent much of his time. I sometimes think that he was happy in Grantchester because he could be free there from passionate distractions.

But all these poems, those that are clever and witty and those that are full of revulsion from physical beauty, were

part of a mood that had no permanence. I remember talking of him one evening to Mr. Yeats, who said that if Brooke could rid his poetry of a certain "languid sensualness," he would probably become a very great poet. I repeated this statement to Brooke in a letter, and I remember that, when he met me soon afterwards, he told me that he had made up his mind to leave England for a year or two. He intended, he said, to travel for a few weeks in the Eastern States of America, and then he would cross the continent to California and stay there for a long while, because California is such a beautiful country. "And then I shall go to the South Sea Islands!"

In the first months of 1914 he was at Samoa, and here he wrote some of his finest poems. In one of them, written at Mataiea, called *The Great Lover*, he reveals himself very clearly. Most of his poems were intimate revelations of his own personality, but in *The Great Lover* the sensuousness of his nature was made perfectly plain:

I have been a great lover: filled my days
So proudly with the splendor of Love's Praise,

and then he describes the things he has loved:

These I have loved:

White plates and cups, clean-gleaming,
Ringed with blue lines; and feathery, faery dust;
Wet roofs, beneath the lamp-light; the strong crust
Of friendly bread; and many tasting food;
Rainbows; and the blue bitter smoke of wood;
And radiant raindrops couching in cool flowers;
And flowers themselves, that sway through many hours,
Dreaming of moths that drink them under the moon;
Then, the cool kindliness of sheets. . . .

* * * * *

The benison of hot water; furs to touch;
The good smell of old clothes; and other such—
The comfortable smell of friendly fingers,
Hair's fragrance, and the musty reek that lingers
About dead leaves and last year's ferns. . . .

Dear names,

And thousand others, throng to me! Royal flames;
Sweet water's dimpling laugh from tap or spring;
Holes in the ground; and voices that do sing;
Voices in laughter, too; and body's pain,
Soon turned to peace; and the deep-panting train;

Firm sands; the little dulling edge of foam
That browns and dwindles as the wave goes home;
And washen stones, gay for an hour; the cold
Graveness of iron; moist black earthen mould;
Sleep; and high places; footprints in the dew;
And oaks; and brown horse-chestnuts, glossy-new;
And new-peeled sticks; and shining pools on grass;—
All these have been my loves. . . .

It is very notable that there is no reference to love of women in this confession of affections, but that omission might have been due to the fact that he had either become too proud to speak of this love again, or he had ceased to be affected by it. What is more interesting to his friends than the omission of women from his list of loves, is the omission of any purely intellectual love. His list does not contain anything that an uninstructed man could not love as ardently as he loved it. A ploughman, incapable of reading or writing, could "make his mark" at the foot of Rupert Brooke's confession in complete sincerity. He may have loved books and pictures and poems and music and sculpture and scholarship, but his love for these things was clearly less than his love for "the strong crust of friendly bread; and many tasting food." I never knew what his intellectual pleasures were. He never spoke of books or pictures, and he may have disliked music as heartily as Mr. Yeats dislikes it. It may be that he was as indifferent to these things as Synge was, and that he was purely a poet of the senses, of things felt and experienced rather than of things thought and perceived. It has sometimes seemed to me that the difference between Doestoevsky and Turgenieff is that the former understood because he had endured, and the latter understood because he had felt. Rupert Brooke belonged to the order of Turgenieff. He loved natural things rather than mental things, and pleasure rather than pain. Pain, it is true, is one of his loves, but only pain "soon turned to peace."

While he was in Samoa, there was a great accretion of power perceptible in what he wrote; and in a "Sonnet (suggested by some of the Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research)" the transition from boyish wit and cleverness to a man's depth of purpose and understanding is clearly seen. There is wit in this sonnet, but with it there is also growing experience and kindling knowledge:

Not with vain tears, when we're beyond the sun,
We'll beat on the substantial doors, nor tread
Those dusty highroads of the aimless dead,
Plaintive for earth; but rather turn and run
Down some close-covered by-way of the air,
Some low sweet valley between wind and wind,
Stoop under faint gleams, thread the shadows, find
Some whispering ghost-forgotten nook, and there

Spend in pure converse our eternal day;
Think each in each, immediately wise;
Learn all we lacked before; hear, know, and say
What this tumultuous body now denies;
And feel, who have laid our groping hands away;
And see, no longer blinded by our eyes.

I was with him on the evening before he went to America, and I never saw him again. At intervals, he sent short notes, and sometimes I saw a poem of his or a descriptive article in a magazine; and I heard of the project that he and his friends, Lascelles Abercrombie, Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, and John Drinkwater, had made to publish their poems in quarterly volumes under the general title of *New Numbers*. I was not in London when he returned to England, but we made plans to meet. Then the war began, and his friend, Winston Churchill, obtained a commission for him in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, and we heard that he had taken part in the hurried and abortive defense of Antwerp. Thereafter, he was in training for a time, and then we were told that he had gone to the Dardanelles.

In the meantime, a volume of *New Numbers* was published, containing the five sonnets written in war time. The extraordinary beauty of these five poems compelled the respect of the most transient mind. Many war poems had been printed in England at and after the beginning of the Disaster: some of them were good, some of them were even notable, but the bulk of them were of incredible badness. Good or bad, none of them had the perfect spirit of Brooke's sonnets. Here were fulfillment and renunciation and immovable resolve. We, here in England, read Lissauer's *Hymn of Hate*, with mingled feelings of astonishment and pity. The *Hymn of Hate* is a powerful poem, but it is powerful in the way that a foul smell is powerful. One turned from that strange expression of an empire's mood to the five sonnets that were written by Rupert Brooke with the

same feeling of thanksgiving with which a man emerges from a gloomy cavern into warm sunlight. There is no hate in these sonnets, no damning of the enemy to everlasting hell, no arrogant demand that God shall do this or that . . . but a fine acceptance of destined things, and simple thankfulness that the hour had not found him unready.

The fifth sonnet has been widely read because its publication was so speedily followed by the death of its author, but its beauty is not dependent on that tragic fortuity. It is a thing of exquisite feeling, made out of the life of a young man to whom the gods had been very generous; and so long as men love their lands, this poem will move them:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's a corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds, dreams happy as her day;
And laughter learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

Rupert Brooke loved England as ardently as Thomas Davis loved Ireland and Garibaldi loved Italy and Dostoevsky loved Russia. Even while he was feeling his way toward firm faiths, this love was strong in him, and the wayward irreverence of rebel youths could not seduce him from it.

I have already quoted *The Soldier*, with its memorable, rich beginning; but the other sonnets are no less noble; indeed, the fourth, called *The Dead*, is even finer than the fifth:

These hearts were woven of human joys and cares,
Washed marvellously with sorrow, swift to mirth.
The years had given them kindness. Dawn was theirs,
And sunset, and the colors of the earth.
These had seen movement, and heard music; known
Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly friended;
Felt the quick pulse of wonder; sat alone;
Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. All this is ended.

There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter
And lit by the rich skies all day. And after
Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance
And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
A width, a shining peace, under the night.

In that poem, and in *Peace* and *The Dead*, there is high majesty and completion, and a self-revelation that is also a self-realization.

He was twenty-seven years of age when he died of sun-stroke in the Ægean. He was taken from the hospital ship at midnight and buried by the light of torches.

I do not suppose he had thought much about the causes of the war. Politics made very little appeal to him, although, like most generous-minded young men, he was a Socialist. These matters were no affair of his. England was at war, and so he must arm himself. It is said that he had a premonition of his death, and that he went to the Ægean in the knowledge that he would not return. That may be so, for poets have eyes that see and ears that hear; but his knowledge did not diminish the pride of his bearing. He made his end in serenity and proud submission.

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich dead!
There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,
But, dying, had made us rarer gifts than gold.
These laid the world away; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that unhopèd serene
That men call age; and those who would have been
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us for our dearth,
Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.
Honor has come back as a king, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
And Nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.

ST. JOHN G. ERVINE.